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ABSTRACT

Contrary to the dismal expectations prevalent in the 1950's, educational radio has not only survived the phenomenal growth of educational television, but has shown unmistakable signs of health and maturity. Though some stations are still groping to overcome problems, others have moved steadily toward the goal of wider and better service for the community. The relationships between parent institutions and stations have become much stronger as the institutions realize the potential of the stations. Local community needs have gained priority in programing, and because of this, new sources of financing are being revealed. The Subsidiary Communications Authorizations of the Federal Communications Commission is being utilized for simultaneous broadcasting and community cable systems are being encouraged. These impressions were gathered by the authors from visits to 181 non-commercial educational radio stations throughout the United States. (MC)

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Educational Radio: The Fifty-Year-Old Adolescent

ERIC/EBR Annual Review Paper

JAMES ROBERTSON AND GERALD G. YOKOM

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Articles

Educational Radio: The Fifty-Year-Old Adolescent
ERIC/EBR Annual Review Paper

James Robertson and Gerald G. Yokom

National Educational Radio on the brink of adulthood

Shortly after the authors joined National Educational Radio (NER), the tape program service known as NERN was voluntarily transferred to National Public Radio (NPR), the newly constituted national programming agency, and NER itself became a trade and professional organization to represent station interests and provide various types of services. In order to determine how member stations might best be served by their national organization, the authors visited every member station over a period of 15 months. This article reports on facts and opinions as to the state of educational radio gathered in the course of their visits.

This article is an ERIC/EBR Annual Review Paper, preparation of which was supported in part by the ERIC [Educational Resources Information Center] Clearing House on Media and Technology, Stanford University, Stanford, California.

James Robertson is president and Gerald Yokom vice-president of National Educational Radio.

Educational radio—a fifty-year-old adolescent—is growing up. There are now 137 stations around the country with sufficient staff, coverage, hours on the air, network programming, and local community involvement to demonstrate what this medium can do when it is given a fair chance.

Somehow noncommercial radio has survived a half century of neglect, undernourishment, and occasional illnesses presumed to be terminal. In the face of educational television's precocious growth in the fifties, educational radio was expected to expire. Today, however, it is healthier than ever, and showing unmistakable signs of real maturity; but like most adolescents it is haunted frequently by self-doubt, uncertainty as to its real identity, and the conviction that it is not really understood or appreciated by its own parents.

Such were the impressions gathered by the authors from visits to 181 noncommercial educational radio stations made between July 1971 and October 1972.

These stations varied from low-power operations covering not much more than their own college campuses to state-wide FM networks covering heavily populated urban centers, suburbia, small towns, and remote farm country. Some of them were licensed to school systems and devoted their entire efforts to classroom instruction, while others carried no instructional programming whatsoever. A few had been on the air continually for a half century, while a few were so new their studios smelled of fresh paint. Budgets, staff capability, condition of technical facilities, and apparent impact upon their local communities varied tremendously from one to another.

What follows concerning radio's condition today is based in part on what the authors have gained from participation in dozens of meetings of boards, committees, task forces, and ad hoc study groups, and from exchanging information and viewpoints with staff colleagues in National Public Radio and in the Radio Activities Office of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Primarily, though, the observations made here are the result of extensive conversations in the field with those who hold the destiny of this fascinating 50-year-old adolescent in their hands.

The files of the Federal Communications Commission currently include licenses for well over 500 noncommercial educational radio stations, but from the outset it must be made clear that we do not possess any firsthand knowledge concerning some 350 of these. This is due not so much to the fact that they have not been members of National Educational Radio, but rather to the actual nature of these stations. Nearly all of them can be classified as either on-the-air training operations for students at high schools, colleges, or universities, or merely as student "activities," somewhat the equivalent of campus newspapers. Someone has dubbed them, perhaps unkindly, "electronic sandboxes," suggesting that they are a kind of practice area for those not yet ready to undertake a serious program service. (It is broadly recognized that in previous decades FM frequencies in the educational band were largely unused and that the FCC went through a period of being lenient in the grant of a license so long as the applicant was a qualified educational institution and proposed using the station for "an educational program".) Some of these stations do provide a useful training function, a program service to student constituents, and occasionally a reasonable reflection to elders in the community of what the student generation is interested in. We draw no conclusions about their activities, since we have not had adequate opportunity to examine what they are doing or how well they are fulfilling their commitment to the FCC.

About thirty of the stations we visited were, however, low-power student operations that maintain membership in NER. Most of these have been initiated by students, and most of them are kept alive by the ingenuity, knowledge, effort, and spirit of students—frequently with little encouragement from their licensee institutions. We visited one such station at a small private college in the midwest that operates with no faculty or administrative advice whatsoever. Its budget of less than $1000 a year comes from student activities funds voted by the campus student association board. On this campus there are no courses in broadcasting, so all training of new staff must be undertaken informally by students training other students. An engineer from a local commercial station comes over occasionally to maintain the equipment and fix anything the technically minded students cannot fix themselves. Programming in this case is directed at both students and townspeople, and includes occasional coverage of campus events, interviews with well-known visitors to the town, an occasional panel program on some issue of campus interest (parking, student hours, etc.), and a lot of music. The music is "easy listening" during the afternoon and early evening, classical concert in mid-evening, then harder and harder rock as the night wears on.

Some low-power student-managed operations have much stronger faculty

liaison. In instances where the institution offers courses in broadcasting, someone in the communication arts or speech or drama department usually acts as advisor, and is looked upon by the active students as either a great help or a severe detriment, depending on the personalities and objectives of both the students and the advisor in question. But there is always someone around—usually the student manager—who has caught a glimpse of what radio can do and wants to make it work.

At the opposite end of the range of diversity among stations visited are those which provide what is frequently referred to today as "full service radio." These stations work very hard to serve the needs of their listeners. They quite consciously and purposefully go about the business of determining what those needs are and reflecting them in their stations' program offerings. Moreover, their schedules characteristically include a wide variety of programs: music of many types; public affairs of local, national and international interest; practical information on such subjects as child care, health, consumer interests, ecology, finance; cultural offerings from the fields of drama and literature; and instructional programs for use in classrooms and on campuses as well as by the independent student who cannot or will not come to a campus or classroom. Increasingly these stations are utilizing the unique capability of FM radio to transmit programs on the subcarrier frequency (SCA) for reception by listening groups with highly specialized interests while the programs of broader appeal and utility are being transmitted on the main FM channel. Thus, the phrase "full service radio" is indeed appropriate.

Stations as yet unable to provide quite such a wide array of program services but still headed toward that objective are also referred to as "public radio" stations. This term has been borrowed from "public television," by which the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television in 1966 meant noncommercial educational television programming directed at the general community, as distinguished from "instructional television" directed at students in the classroom or otherwise in the context of formal education. With the emergence of the Public Brooadcasting Act of 1967 and National Public Radio, it probably was natural to call those noncommercial educational radio stations that were demonstrating a new and active interest in serving the various publics in their local communities "public radio" stations.

In fact, the move toward serving a broader range of community interests and needs than in former times can probably be identified as the major trend in noncommercial educational radio in the past three years. Certainly this is true among the stations belonging to NER. Even a number of stations licensed for decades to school boards and utilized almost exclusively for instructional purposes in the past—notably in Portland, Indianapolis, Cleveland, and Chicago—have extended their on-air hours, added staff, combined resources with those of other educational and cultural institutions in their communities, qualified for CPB assistance, joined the NPR network, and are now providing local listeners with far greater variety and an improved quality of programming. Many stations licensed to colleges and universities, content in previous years to furnish a classical music service and a limited number of local programs by faculty members, are gearing up to deal with such matters as local public affairs and the needs of minorities in their communities. Some stations that never before offered any kind of instructional programming are exploring how they can finally be of use to their local educational institutions in offering formal educational opportunities by radio.

To a great extent, recent interest in "full service radio" has been generated by the availability of federal funds for local station assistance through the Corportation for Public Broadcasting. CPB's criteria, resulting from extensive consultation among NER's board of directors and other radio professionals, requiring stations to possess a minimum number of full-time personnel, to be on the air

essentially full time, and to furnish a varied program service, have induced many stations to undertake a broader service to their local publics. When the CPB project began in 1970 only 73 stations were able to qualify. By July 1, 1973, it is expected that nearly 150 stations will have qualified for CPB community service grants, which also puts them in line for membership in National Public Radio and the resulting participation in live, interconnected network program service now approaching 25 hours per week.[1] While there still is great diversity among the stations so qualified, they constitute a recognizable group of licensees who have made a serious commitment, in terms of staff, equipment, and operating schedule, to providing their communities with what is now called "public radio" service.

There are numerous stations which, for various reasons, have as yet been unable to qualify for CPB basic support but which, in their own way, still serve their local communities. Most of these are licensed to educational institutions where today's fiscal problems make it virtually impossible to extend the station's schedule to six and seven days a week and its staff to the required number of full-time people. Some stations, particularly those where the function of broadcast training is considered equal in importance to the function of program service to the local community, do not wish to change their mode of operation merely to receive CPB support. In their own way, some of them seem to be serving their local communities well. In our view, the fact that a licensee operates his station in a manner which does not qualify him for CPB assistance does not necessarily mean that he is not providing an important and useful service to his local community.

However, the more frequent condition among those NER member stations not yet qualified for CPB assistance is that they are striving to develop the resources that eventually will enable them to qualify for such support and thus for NPR live programming. It is to be hoped that CPB's funding in the future will be sufficient to allow the Corporation to implement its plans for greatly increased and more numerous development grants, designed to assist non-CPB-qualified stations over a two-year period to acquire adequate staffs and build up on-air schedules to a point where they, too, will be a part of the growing public radio system.

We hasten to add that although federal funds are often providing the critical difference and the incentive which lifts mediocrity toward excellence, less than 20 per cent of the financial support for educational radio stations today comes from federal sources.

If educational radio is going to grow into real maturity and take its rightful place in American society, the educational institutions and other community entities who are its licensees must find the necessary support funds in the educational budgets and the philanthropic resources of the local communities which these stations serve. The questions then arise as to how well these stations serve their communities and whether a heavier investment in public radio will pay off?

One determining factor, of course, is the nature of radio itself. Radio is far less expensive than other media. Both production and listening can be done almost anywhere. Recording of audio materials is easy and economical. Equipment is simple to handle. Raw materials are cheap. The skills necessary to good production can be readily learned. Technical requirements are not difficult to meet. Moreover, radio does not intrude on the events it covers. It is economical in its use of spectrum space and power. It possesses the capability of transmitting several programs simultaneously to different audiences. It can reach an infinite number and variety of listeners in any imaginable configuration, either heavily concentrated or widely dispersed, over very large geo-

[1] NPR also provides an extensive scheduled tape program service and a library service available to all noncommercial educational radio licensees, whether or not they are qualified for CPB support or are NPR members.

graphical areas. It can link the listener to an event while it is taking place, or store and retrieve the event at will. And because it enlists the thought processes and stimulates the imagination to such a great extent, it deeply involves the listener in what he hears and thus becomes an immensely useful educational and informational tool.

A second determining factor is the extent to which those at all levels of the licensee institution have grasped the potential of these characteristics and are putting them to work. With this in mind, we have selected for report a number of aspects of radio as we found it being practiced, have tried to suggest how and why some stations are still groping to overcome problems and seize possibilities, while others are steadily moving toward a maturity marked by wider and better service to their communities.

Relationship to Parent Institution

Good administration in any field requires clear and open lines of communication and understanding between the top-level decision makers and the group in charge of day-to-day operations. It was no surprise, therefore, to discover that the significance of a public radio station's service in its community is directly proportional to the degree of understanding and support it receives from the top administrators of its licensee institution.

During some station visits, the person in charge of the station spent every moment talking with us all by himself. During others, we were utilized to help tell the story of public radio to administrators higher up. Some of the latter, though unfailingly courteous, obviously knew little about the radio station and seemed to care less, and were almost relieved when we left. Others were full of questions, eager to learn how to strengthen their stations, proud of what was being accomplished, and planning expansion of service. We were not surprised that very few top administrators fully understood all of the potentials of radio; however, an encouraging proportion of them obviously had given considerable thought to radio's proper role in their institutions and communities. In these instances, without exception, the station was already providing a significant service.

In situtions where the top decision makers and budget formulators did not, for whatever reasons, understand what radio might do to further the goals of their institutions, budgets were consistently low, staff small, station objectives hazy, and local programming to meet local needs severely limited.

Some station managers showed signs of never having been able to talk with their presidents or superintendents, but related how their proposals were filtered through several levels of educational administrators who were for the most part competing with radio for budget dollars rather than recommending ways in which radio might be used to further the goals of the institution. On the other hand, one able manager whose station provides a wide array of badly needed services to its small-town and rural area confided in us that he probably had a more effective way of communicating with his university's president than many of the deans on campus: when the president visited the station's studios to present his weekly on-the-air chat about university matters to listeners in the community, there was always time for exchange of questions or concerns about what the station was accomplishing or what it needed next.

On the whole, the fact that in three years the number of stations undertaking a sufficient radio commitment to qualify for CPB support has nearly doubled is an encouraging sign of maturity, for in each case some top administrator had to understand and approve local commitments.

Response to Local Community Needs

For years, many educational radio stations were programmed not so much in terms of what listeners needed as what was readily available. Some still are. In nearly every community the lack of classical music on other radio stations has led the educational station to pro-

vide many hours of it, and this may indeed be a legitimate function. But recently radio has demonstrated that its unique characteristics are particularly adaptable to responding to other kinds of community needs—for local people to obtain access to media in order to get their stories told and their concerns aired, for qualified local artists to be given an audience, and for local candidates for political office to be heard.

We found a very large proportion of NER member stations newly involved in responding to these and similar local needs—certainly a sign of maturity. Large stations are mounting substantial special projects. Several stations now broadcast an hour a day of programming for minorities in areas where such groups face real difficulties in knowing where to go for assistance of various kinds; the programs feature music these listeners particularly enjoy and an amazing variety of information useful to them.

The telephone call-in technique has been adopted by many public radio stations as an adjunct to interview or discussion programs with public officials, thus allowing listeners in their homes to question those who govern them.

Such enterprise is not limited to large stations. A high-school station south of Chicago covers local village board meetings each month, produces documentaries (planned and put together by high school juniors as year-long individual study projects) on social problems in the suburbs, and has researched and broadcast an audio account of what had happened to prisoners-of-war from that community.

A South Dakota station sent a team to a nearby Indian reservation over many months to develop trust and eventually provide the basis for special programming to meet the needs of this minority population. Another station in the same state found federal funding for an extensive training project for Indians to assist them in using media for the benefit of their own people.

There is a strong trend in almost all stations toward a more conscious and objective analysis of community needs and a corresponding response to those needs in local programming. While in some instances stations have gone no further than realizing the desirability of doing this, most of them are in the process of reallocating their present resources and requesting additional ones for these purposes. Frequently the local public radio station is far more involved in local community programming than any local commercial station. Probably this should be the case, but unfortunately public radio stations generally do not yet have adequate financial support to acquire the quality or number of personnel essential to this kind of program effort.

New Sources of Financing

Until recently, nearly all educational radio stations were financed entirely by their licensee institutions. Most of them still are. But as the real possibilities of public radio begin to become apparent, it is widely feared that not enough money can be earmarked in educational institutions' budgets to do the full job that public radio is capable of taking on. Therefore, additional money must come from somewhere else.

At the same time, public television has been demonstrating that those who benefit from programs sometimes will help to pay the bill for a non-profit, noncommercial broadcasting enterprise. Educational television also has found occasional underwriters to furnish certain outstanding program series.

These conditions have given rise to another clear trend in educational radio: Besides sharing the need for increased financial support within institutional budgets, public radio is beginning to show strong interest in community fundraising, underwriting and listener support.

Probably the outstanding example of this new interest is the development in Minnesota of a statewide educational radio network of stations financed almost entirely by foundation grants, contracts for special program projects, and listener support. Pacifica Foundation has operated stations on listener contributions in Berkeley, Los Angeles, Houston, and New York. Stations with a strong religious

orientation have sustained themselves on listener contributions for some years. But the Minnesota effort is the first statewide system of comprehensive audio communications to be financed in this manner. It is not only successful so far but is growing rapidly to provide coverage eventually to the entire state.

Community supported public television organizations in more than a dozen communities are taking on a public radio station concurrently and will bring some fund-raising and development experience into the radio arena. A few university development officers are suddenly awakening to the possibility that private donors as yet untapped may be interested in supporting radio as a new approach to educational outreach. Even some stations licensed to school systems are finding that listeners will send in tax-deductible contributions to assist in expanding or improving the quality of that portion of their schedule not devoted to direct instruction. We predict that the next few years will bring a substantial increase in support for public radio from non-public funds, provided that licensee institutions will awaken to this opportunity and enable their station managers and development officers to go after outside funding in a systematic and capable manner.

Instruction by Radio

As NER's Task Force on Instructional Radio concluded after a ten-month study in 1971–72:

> Most educators and many broadcasters were unaware of the potential of any of the media for instruction until the irrepressible attractions of television came along and forced a consideration of new ways to use technology in the learning process.[2]

[2] This and the following quotations are from the NER Instructional Radio Task Force report, "Radio's Role in Instruction." This publication is a comprehensive review of instructional radio today, with guidelines for the proper development of effective audio instruction. Copies are available at $3.00 each from National Educational Radio, 1346 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

The same Task Force asked station managers across the country whether they felt educators in their areas were "generally aware of the instructional possibilities of radio" and found that two-thirds of them were not. As expressed by an administrator of a well-established school radio instructional service:

> It's not that people are against instructional radio. It's not that people refuse to support instructional radio. It's just that most people *have never heard of* instructional radio!

Despite the fact that in several major cities and in some mid-western states, notably Wisconsin, instructional radio services have been used extensively for several decades, instruction has not been educational radio's main function in this country up to now. A large majority of educational radio stations have come into being initially either as training operations or as adjuncts of the university extension tradition of carrying the resources of a great institution to all of the people in a state. So it was in 1971–72 that no more than 40 per cent of NER member stations responding to a Task Force questionnaire were then involved in "instructional" radio, although twice that proportion indicated a new interest in it.

Instructional uses of radio are of increasing interest to stations as their own administrations begin to grasp its effectiveness and relatively low cost, but as yet they are ill-equipped to handle it properly. Most public radio personnel are more oriented to broadcasting as an audience service than to educational objectives and how the medium may help to attain them. If radio is to take its proper place in the arsenal of electronic learning aids, radio stations generally will have to acquire or develop liaison with professionals who know how people learn, and they will need to master the systems approach to instructional design before undertaking the development of substantial instructional fare.

Even so, the field is intriguing more and more station managers, particularly

as they become aware of reports like these:

> In a comprehensive study of the use of radio and of television in all of the 2650 elementary schools in its state, the Wisconsin School of the Air found that better than 82% of all classrooms were using radio voluntarily. In classrooms where both TV and radio were available, use of radio has slightly *increased* since the advent of television. . . .
>
> Similarly, the New York City school broadcasting service, also a consistent user of the dramatic format in radio instructional broadcasts, found that in 1970–71, after thirteen years of available television as well as radio for classroom use, the actual figures stood as follows:
>
> Number of classrooms using television: 13,544
>
> Number of classrooms using radio: 21,248
>
> The attributes of radio can be used for instructional purposes to activate the mind of the student. It is a medium that involves the learner and permits active participation through spoken response and discussion, physical activity, creative expression, and inquiry or it can quietly touch areas of deep feeling.

Some radio managers also have become aware of the income their public television brethren acquire annually from schools and other educational institutions using their facilities and paying for such use pro rata. Both because it is a viable educational service not widely available and because it offers new potential for fiscal support, instructional radio is of increasing interest to public radio managers.

FM Multiplex (SCA)

FM radio's capability of transmitting more than one program at a time through use of what FCC calls Subsidiary Communications Authorization (SCA) has been utilized by commercial FM broadcasters as a means of furnishing music service to stores and offices aside from their normal broadcast schedule. WHA at the University of Wisconsin and WAMC at Albany Medical College have been pioneering in educational uses of SCA for several years. In our recent visits we found a growing number of public radio stations in the process of equipping themselves to offer special educational services in this manner.

Typical of these is the day-and-night service to the blind now presented by Minnesota Educational Radio over its several stations, by the "Audio Reader" of KANU–FM at the University of Kansas, and by the South Carolina educational broadcasting authority over its newly developing radio facilities. Wisconsin's state FM network, programmed by WHA, uses its subcarrier for special medical conferences, in-service courses for other types of professionals, and even for statewide University Extension faculty meetings, with personnel gathered in more than 100 conference rooms throughout the state, all equipped with the necessary special SCA receiver. WOUB–FM in Athens, Ohio, uses SCA to provide special programming for students in school buses while they ride back and forth for 90 minutes each day.

Because of SCA's economy and its ability to reach only specified listeners, it is of increasing interest to stations as a way of providing highly specialized materials not appropriate for use on the main channel.[3] This is another way in which educational radio stations can extend the kinds of services offered to their communities. It is encouraging to note, as another intimation of growing maturity, that so many stations are doing so.

Radio and Community Cable Systems

Cable television was once considered to be merely a new way of distributing television signals. As it rapidly shows signs of becoming a more pervasive communications system in many communities, radio's friends are speaking up to demand that their kind of electronic signals also be carried by cable systems everywhere.

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[3] A full explanation of SCA is appended to the NER Instructional Radio Task Force Report (see footnote 2).

NER told the Federal Communications Commission in May of 1972 that ". . . it is essential that local public radio stations should be carried on local CATV systems. . . ." Even though radio managers generally have not been alert to the possibilities of a comfortable liaison with their local cable people, there are a number of exceptions. In quite a few communities the radio manager has participated in the drafting of local cable television ordinances. In Wyoming, plans are being discussed which, if eventually implemented, would interconnect the entire state via cable with one public radio station supplying the programming to Wyoming's widely scattered population. In Northern Michigan, the music channel on the cable system is programmed by the local public radio station. In western Pennsylvania, a cable system is reimbursing the local public radio station for the privilege of carrying its play-by-play coverage of local basketball on the cable system as well as on the station's own FM transmitter.

More public radio station managers should be developing realistic relationships with local cable operators, since cable can be a useful supplement to present-day transmission and may eventually become a major method for the distribution of educational audio. Even a small station with limited budget and staff may still find that its influence is materially increased by furnishing appropriate types of programming to its local cable system. Since some cable systems reach into homes not equipped to receive educational FM signals, this also opens up the possibility of developing many new friends for public radio.

In Retrospect

To some degree our fifteen months of visits to local educational radio stations leaves us merely confused, for no two stations are alike, and there are almost no models to which to point. Public radio, like any adolescent, is very complex. It is not the same today as it was yesterday. Over a year's time one can perceive substantial growth in some stations. On the other hand, we visited stations where there seems to have been very little growth or change in years.

The prevailing impression that remains with us is that radio is seriously under-utilized in this country as an educational, cultural, and informational medium—but that this condition is being recognized by more people each day. The incentives provided by federal funding through the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, under policies carefully constructed with the advice and recommendation of stations and their representatives, together with the remarkable programming now furnished by National Public Radio already have had, and will continue to have, very positive effects. If maintained and strengthened during the next few years, they may enable America to develop a full-fledged public radio system. Meanwhile, supplementing that system will be additional educational stations, many of them quite small, some of them quite specialized, employing the remarkably flexible medium of radio in different ways to serve different needs of their respective local communities.

To accomplish this, many other things must happen. Licensee institutions who are the parents of these offspring must try to understand better what the stations are trying to become and must try to see more clearly their ultimate adult potential. Professionals in the public radio field must constantly upgrade their own abilities, for the challenges of today are small compared with those of tomorrow. Leaders in government who are charged with the responsibility for overseeing and guiding our national communications must pay more attention to radio rather than become unduly preoccupied with that other more rambunctious and more charismatic adolescent, television. And everyone who senses the importance in a democracy of the freedom to hear all points of view, to be exposed to all kinds of artistic expression, and to be concerned with all kinds of his fellow Americans, must be alert to the opportunities inherent in educational radio as a medium for true and significant service to all of our people.